

# Letter from the desert

By Cmdr. Rob Carey

I received an e-mail in late October from the *CHIPS* editor, Sharon Anderson, who asked me if I would write about my experiences here and what I am doing.

So what is the recently selected Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer doing as an engineer assigned to a construction regiment (Seabees) in Iraq? Well, many things! Then I realized, heck, there's really not much that I can say about what I do because nearly everything (and for good reasons) I read or hear is classified because of OPSEC (operational security) rules!

What I thought I could do is talk about what it is like to serve in Iraq to help you understand a little about serving the nation and Navy in Iraq. I am the plans officer for a construction regiment. We provide engineering support to I Marine Expeditionary Force (IMEF) (Fwd)/Multi-National Force West. I work very closely with superb officers on the IMEF (Fwd) staff to work engineering aspects of large strategic projects, as well as to assist the interests of the Seabees so that as operations are executed, engineering facets are supportive of the goals of each mission.

I have been in theater about two months, and have settled into a routine that is very different from one inside the Beltway. In short, life in a coalition operating base is filled with visions of the movie "Groundhog Day," interrupted by unnatural sounds and occasionally earth-shaking thunder. It's quite a dramatic shift from life in Virginia, but overall, my teammates and I are doing well.

We arrived to temperatures around 120 F, and as of this writing, daytime highs remain in the upper 80s. Dust storms are a thing to behold, and they generally precede the rainstorms which have recently just started. After the rain, mud is everywhere, and I mean everywhere! I am not sure which environment I prefer: heat or mud. The heat is so intense that the breeze is hot on your exposed skin, and the mud can make your boots weigh 5 pounds more — or so it seems.

The sunsets here are cool to watch if you happen to be out there and looking west at that time. Probably, the "moon dust" helps with the atmospheric.

The sounds and smells of this place permeate one's senses. Whether it be the startling thunder of our artillery being delivered (as has happened to me more than once at night walking home), or the foul smell of the garbage pits burning — glowing on the horizon at night rather eerily. My walk home at night could serve as a backdrop to film many a horror movie!

We have it much easier than the ground troops at smaller forward operating bases and combat outposts. They are out every day in a bizarre, yet deadly cat and mouse game with the insurgents.

The Seabees here help to build most of those facilities — often in the middle of very dangerous places. There are many "Fort Apaches" here in Iraq. Watching these young Marines, Soldiers and Sailors go out the gate on convoys, armed to the teeth (some have yet to shave) is truly amazing — a sight to behold.

There are many 18 and 19-year-olds who hold the decision of life in their hands every day — and they perform magnificently.



Navy Commander and recently selected DON CIO Rob Carey in Iraq.

Some seem numb to conditions here. Convoys often operate at night, so they present hard targets; we call them "vampires."

You will all be glad to know that the power of information technology here at the tip of the spear is enormous. The use of the Web is standard. VOIP [voice-over-IP] is used as a mainstream phone system. Most everyone has a personal computer on their desk.

And while things here perform very well, we must not take for granted that we are working to support the team at the tip of the spear. My being here shows me firsthand that there is much work to be done to realize the vision of the GIG [Global Information Grid] connecting the battlefield to the wealth of information that exists in the United States. The vision of seamless "reachback" must accommodate the reality of the operating forces' architecture and equipment.

I work in a Southwest Asia (SWA) hut, a 16 by 32-foot wooden structure, which is basically a big shed with a plywood floor and walls. We have air conditioning — if we didn't — the computers would not operate. I am convinced the A/C is for them — not for us. Of course, we expanded the SWA hut (because we could) and built a 16 by 16-foot addition. There are 11 Seabees who work here in the building. I have a master chief and a chief who help keep me out of trouble. A tall order I know, but they are both bigger than I am and that helps.

The Marines have been super to work with here. From the generals to the lance corporals, they are professional and friendly.

"I have traveled a bit and by far the worst place that I've seen is Ar Ramadi — hands down. The guys who live and serve there are very special. Every day, life outside the wire is pure combat with no holds barred."

— Cmdr. Rob Carey

They definitely like and respect Seabees, probably because we have men who patrol the roads at night ready for trouble like they do. Not to mention, we build most of their combat outposts and forward operating bases.

The Seabees are focused and driven to deliver whatever is needed by the Marines, Sailors and Soldiers in the area of operations to get the mission accomplished.

I have traveled a bit and by far the worst place that I've seen is Ar Ramadi — hands down. The guys who live and serve there are very special. Every day, life outside the wire is pure combat with no holds barred.

Inside the wire, it is dirty, dry and grimy. The insurgents attack our convoys with IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in the road, snipers, mortars and small arms. We counter them with tanks, attack helicopters, fixed-wing close air support, artillery, crew-served weapons — and our snipers — who are **FAR** better than theirs.

The Al Anbar province is the most violent place I have ever visited in my life. Quite a change of pace from inside the Beltway and soccer games in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Outside the walls, we are all targets.

The surgical team sent an e-mail requesting blood donors, and there seemed to be many. Just like on the television show "MASH" — wounded were in. I had to get ready for my helo flight or would have donated on the spot. Surgical is on my way home each night. When we see helos on its landing pads we know that the surgical team is working to save lives ...

There have been some humorous moments here, like the time one of my fellow officers was stopped at the galley for trying to take a cookie with him as he left — unbelievable. It's amazing what can make you laugh here.

Speaking of the galley, it's like being in grammar school: you come in with four or five folks and want to sit with each other. After getting your tray and food, you look up — and there is a sea of tan uniforms — your friends are lost in the ocean of uniformity. Watching the young kids eat! Yikes! They deserve the best!

Getting caught unaware by our outbound artillery when you're walking in the dark, minding your own business, a bit tired, thinking of home, is quite an experience — BOOM — at 100 meters away! It's sort of like someone shooting a shotgun off next to your head when you aren't paying attention. It's a bit disturbing, but it's nice that it is outbound and not landing in camp! The howitzers are pretty close to where I work. Generally, the shooting makes the dust re-settle in the SWA hut I work in! Still, the artillery gunfire is welcome when it is directed toward the enemy.

Being here and serving the nation in this "away game" definitely makes me appreciate all that we have in the United States of America. This tour makes me pause and think a great deal, and to reflect on what we take for granted: liberty, freedom and equality.

While we all complain about traffic, the heat, the humidity, the price of gas, why Congress isn't doing what we think is right, the snow, a wet newspaper, a grocery store not having the steaks we wanted, just remember that having that right to complain is pretty damn cool.

So while I have worked for the Army and Navy for 24 years, and have been in uniform as a Reserve officer for more than 17, I am once again amazed at the strength of this nation, and the talented men and women of the armed forces. I am nothing but proud to serve.

So are we making a difference? I think so. We all are.



Robert Carey and then DON CIO Dave Wennergren at the Federal 100 Awards 2006 black-tie gala March 20, 2006. Carey was recognized with a Federal 100 award for leading information assurance strategy and policy development and implementation efforts that significantly improved the security of DON systems and networks.

"SowhileIhaveworkedfortheArmyandNavyfor24years, andhavebeeninuniformasaReserveofficerformorethan 17,Iamonceagainamazedatthestrengthofthisnation, andthetalentedmenandwomenofthearmedforces.Iam nothingbutproudtoserve."

— Cmdr. Rob Carey

Mr. Robert J. Carey was designated as the Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer (DON CIO) effective Nov. 26, 2006. Reporting directly to the Secretary of the Navy, he is the principal adviser to the Secretary in all matters related to the mandates of the Clinger-Cohen Act; Chapter 35 of Title 44, United States Code; Section 2223 of Title 10. In his position as DON CIO, Mr. Carey is also designated as the DON Critical Infrastructure Assurance Officer.

Until his return from his deployment in Iraq, Mr. John J. Lussier is designated as the acting DON CIO.

Mr. Carey is also a Commander, Civil Engineer Corps in a U.S. Navy Reserve unit. He serves as plans officer for a construction regiment in Iraq. He is expected to return to his civilian life early 2007.

CHIPS